

Old Nubian

Old Nubian (also called **Middle Nubian** or **Old Nobii**) is an extinct Nubian language, attested in writing from the 8th to the 15th century AD. It is ancestral to modern-day Nobiin and closely related to Dongolawi and Kenzi. It was used throughout the kingdom of Makuria, including the eparchy of Nobatia. The language is preserved in more than a hundred pages of documents and inscriptions, both of a religious (homilies, prayers, hagiographies, psalms, lectionaries), and related to the state and private life (legal documents, letters), written using an adaptation of the Coptic alphabet.

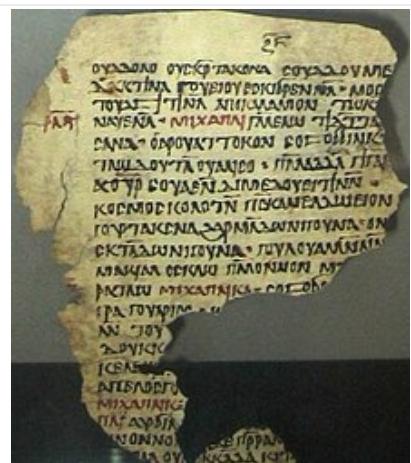
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History

Old Nubian had its source in the languages of the Noba nomads who occupied the Nile between the first and third cataracts of the Nile and the Makurian nomads who occupied the land between the third and fourth cataracts following the collapse of Meroë sometime in the 4th century. The Makurians were a separate tribe who eventually conquered or inherited the lands of the Noba: they established a Byzantine-influenced state called Makuria which administered the Noba lands separately as the eparchy of Nobatia. Nobatia was converted to the Miaphysite Christianity by Julian of Halicarnassus and Longinus, and thereafter received its bishops from the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria.^[2]

Old Nubian	
Native to	Egypt, Sudan
Region	Along the banks of the Nile in Lower and Upper Nubia (southern Egypt and northern Sudan)
Era	4th–15th century. Gave rise to Nobiin.
Language family	Nilo-Saharan? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eastern Sudanic ▪ Nubian ▪ Nile Nubian ▪ Old Nubian
Writing system	Nubian
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	onw
Linguist List	onw (http://multiree.org/codes/onw)
Glottolog	oldn1245 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/oldn1245) ^[1]



A page from an Old Nubian translation of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, from the 9th–10th century, found at Qasr Ibrim, now at the British Museum. Michael's name appears in red with a characteristic epenthetic -i.

Old Nubian is one of the oldest written African languages and appears to have been adopted from the 10th–11th century as the main language for the civil and religious administration of Makuria. Besides Old Nubian, Koine Greek was widely used, especially in religious contexts, while Coptic mainly predominates in funerary inscriptions.^[3] Over time, more and more Old Nubian began to appear in both secular and religious documents (including the Bible), while several grammatical aspects of Greek, including the case, agreement, gender, and tense morphology underwent significant erosion.^[4] The consecration documents found with the remains of archbishop Timotheos suggest, however, that Greek and Coptic continued to be used into the late 14th century, by which time Arabic was also in widespread use.

Writing

The script in which nearly all Old Nubian texts have been written is a slanted uncial variant of the Coptic alphabet, originating from the White Monastery in Sohag.^[5] The alphabet included three additional letters ψ /ɲ/ and ȝ /w/, and ւ /j/, the first two deriving from the Meroitic alphabet. The presence of these characters suggest that although the first written evidence of Old Nubian dates to the 8th century, the script must have already been developed in the 6th century, following the collapse of the Meroitic state.^[6] Additionally, Old Nubian used the variant δ for the Coptic letter σ.

<u>Character</u>	ା	ବ	ର	ଙ୍କ	ୟ	ୱ	ଶ	ହ	୧	ି	କ	ଳ	ମ	ନ	ଙ୍ଗୁଳି	୦
<u>Transliteration</u>	a	b	g	d	y	v	sh	h	i	ī	k	l	m	n	x	o
<u>Phonetic value</u>	/a, a:/	/b/	/g/	/d/	/e, e:/	/i, i:/	/z/	/i, i:/	/t/	/j/	/k, g/	/l/	/m/	/n/	/ks/	/o, o:/
<u>Character</u>	ଓୟ	ମ	ପ	ଚ	ତ	ୟ	ଫ	ଖ	ୢ	୨	୧	ଙ	୯	୮	ୣ	୩
<u>Transliteration</u>	ou	p	r	s	t	u	ph	kh	ps	ō	š	h	j	ŋ	ñ	w
<u>Phonetic value</u>	/u, u:/	/b/	/r/	/s/	/t/	/i, u/	/f/	/x/	/ps/	/o, o:/	/ʃ/	/h/	/tʃ/	/ŋ/	/ɲ/	/w/

The characters z, ȝ/ȝ̥, x, ψ only appear in Greek loanwords. Gemination was indicated by writing double consonants; long vowels were usually not distinguished from short ones. Old Nubian featured two digraphs: oȝ /u, u:/ and eȝ /i, i:/ . A diaeresis over ȝ (ȝ) was used to indicate the semivowel /j/. In addition, Old Nubian featured a supralinear stroke, which could indicate:

- a vowel that formed the beginning of a syllable or was preceded by λ, Ν, Ρ, δ;
 - an /i/ preceding a consonant.

Modern Nobiin is a tonal language; if Old Nubian was tonal as well, the tones were not marked.

Punctuation marks included a high dot •, sometimes substituted by a double backslash \\ (₩), which was used roughly like an English period or colon; a slash / (↗), which was used like a question mark; and a double slash // (₩), which was sometimes used to separate verses.

Grammar

Nouns

Old Nubian has no gender. The noun consists of a stem to which derivational suffixes may be added. Plural markers, case markers, postpositions, and the determiner are added on the entire noun phrase, which may also comprise adjectives, possessors, and relative clauses.

Determination

Old Nubian has one definite determiner -(!)λ.^[7] The precise function of this morpheme has been a matter of controversy, with some scholars proposing it as nominative case or subjective marker. Both the distribution of the morpheme and comparative evidence from Meroitic, however, point to a use as determiner.^{[8][9]}

Case

Old Nubian has a nominative-accusative case system with four structural cases determining the core arguments in the sentence,^[10] as well as a number of lexical cases for adverbial phrases.

Structural Cases	Nominative	-
	Accusative	-κ(ᾳ)
	Genitive	-ν(ᾳ)
	Dative	-λα
Lexical Cases	Locative	-λο
	Allative	-ρλ(λε)
	Superessive	-Δο
	Subessive	-Δον
	Comitative	-Δαλ

Number

The most common plural marker is -ρογ, which always precedes case marking. There are a few irregular plurals, such as ειτ, pl. ει "man"; τοτ, pl. τογφ "child." Furthermore, there are traces of separate animate plural forms in -ρι, which are textually limited to a few roots, e.g. χρικτιλνος-ρι-ρογ "Christians"; μογρ-ρι-ρογ "dogs."

Pronouns

Old Nubian has several sets of pronouns and subject clitics^[11] are the following, of which the following are the main ones:

Person	Independent Pronoun	Subject Clitic
I	ᾳ	-ι
you (sg.)	ειρ	-ν
he/she/it	ταρ	-ν
we (including you)	ερ	-ογ
we (excluding you)	ογ	-ογ
you (pl.)	ογρ	-ογ
they	τερ	-λν

There are two demonstrative pronouns: ειν, pl. ειν-ῆ-ρογ "this" and μαν, pl. μαν-ῆ-ρογ "that." Interrogative words include εαι "who?"; μῆ "what?"; and a series of question words based on the root ē.

Verbs

The Old Nubian verbal system is by far the most complex part of its grammar, allowing for valency, tense, mood, aspect, person and pluractionality to be expressed on it through a variety of suffixes.

The main distinction between nominal and verbal predicates in a main clause versus a subordinate clause is indicated by the presence of the predicate marker -λ.^[12] The major categories, listing from the root of the verb to the right, are as follows:

Valency

Transitive	-ΔP
Causative	-ΓΔP
Inchoative	-ΔΣ
Passive	-ΤΔΚ

Pluractionality

Pluractional	-δ
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Aspect

Perfective	-ε
Habitual	-κ
Intentional	-ΔΔ

Tense

Present	-λ
Past 1	-ολ
Past 2	-c

Person

This can be indicated by a three different series of subject clitics, which are obligatory only in certain grammatical contexts.

Sample text

- P.QI 1 4.ii.25 κτκα γελγελόσογάννον ἵησουσι μαψάν τρίκα· δολλε πολγάρα [πεσσνά·] παπο σκελμμε εκ[κα]
- *kit-ka gelgel-os-ou-an-non iēsousi mañan tri-ka dolle polgar-a pes-s-n-a pap-o iskel-im-m-e eik-ka*
- stone-ACC roll-PFV-PST1-3PL-TOP Jesus eye.DU both-ACC high raise.CAUS-PRED speak-PST2-2/3/SG-PRED father-VOC thank-AFF-PRS-1SG.PRED you-ACC

"And when they rolled away the rock, Jesus raised his eyes high and said: Father, I thank you."

Notes

1. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Old Nubian" (<http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/oldn1245>). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
2. Hatke, George (2013). *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (https://books.google.com/books?id=Oy7N_d6HoYIC&pg=PA161). NYU Press. p. 161. ISBN 978-0-8147-6283-7.
3. Ochała 2014, pp. 44–45.
4. Burstein 2006.

5. Boud'hors 1997.
6. Rilly 2008, p. 198.
7. Zyhlarz 1928, p. 34.
8. Van Gerven Oei 2011, pp. 256–262.
9. Rilly 2010, p. 385.
10. Van Gerven Oei 2014, pp. 170–174.
11. Van Gerven Oei 2018.
12. Van Gerven Oei 2015.

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External links

- Extended details on all the letters of the Old Nubian alphabet, especially the additional ones, can be found in this Unicode proposal (<http://dkuug.dk/jtc1/sc2/wg2/docs/n2744.pdf>) by [Michael Everson](#) and [Stephen Emmel](#).
 - The Basic Languages of Christian Nubia: Greek, Coptic, Old Nubian, and Arabic. [Ancient Sudan website.](http://www.ancientsudan.org/writing_03_old_nubian_&_arabic.htm) (http://www.ancientsudan.org/writing_03_old_nubian_&_arabic.htm)
 - Old Nubian basic lexicon at the Global Lexicostatistical Database (<http://starling.rinet.ru/cgi-bin/response.cgi?root=new100&morpho=0&basename=new100\esu\nub&limit=-1>)
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